

*Divine Hiddenness and the Nature of Belief**

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Abstract: In this paper we argue that attention to the intricacies relating to belief illustrate crucial difficulties with Schellenberg's hiddenness argument. This issue has been only tangentially discussed in the literature to date. Yet we judge this aspect of Schellenberg's argument deeply significant. We claim that focus on the nature of belief manifests a central flaw in the hiddenness argument. Additionally, attention to doxastic subtleties provides important lessons about the nature of faith.

J.L. Schellenberg presents an argument for atheism from the phenomenon of divine hiddenness. In short, a loving God would give those individuals willing to believe enough evidence to believe, yet there exist persons willing to believe who lack the crucial evidence. In this essay we argue that Schellenberg's argument does not work.

In brief our argument runs as follows: we will show that Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness is subject to crucial ambiguities with regard to the notion of belief. Attention to subtleties pertaining to belief allows one to disambiguate key premises of the hiddenness argument. Once this is done the hiddenness argument collapses; the disambiguated premises are either false, or true but not conducive to Schellenberg's purposes. Our general strategy involves two stages. In the first stage we disambiguate the key premises and in the second stage we evaluate the premises. Part of

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the evaluation phase involves following the suggestion of Peter van Inwagen¹ in offering a *defense* of Christianity in the sense that we are going to be exploiting certain subtleties in the concept of belief to tell an internally consistent story which entails both that omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect and perfectly loving being exists and that this being is hidden.

As van Inwagen points out² at the heart of every defense is a reason or set of reasons for permitting the nefarious phenomenon. Our reason is, roughly, that the kind of relationship God most desires to have with human-like creatures is one which requires some epistemic distance. This is because the kind of relationship God wants is one in which the agent *longs* for God in a way that is best accomplished in many individuals via a period of doubt.³

This core idea reveals the first subtlety of belief which we will exploit. We call it the synchronic/diachronic distinction. We look at belief not as static at some time, but as developing and growing—through various phases—*over* time. The second distinction is the de re/de dicto distinction. De re belief—as we will illustrate in a series of cases—is both available now and can lay the foundation for the right kind of relationship later. The third distinction we will exploit is the full belief/partial belief distinction. “Low-grade” belief—belief in degrees fairly low, including somewhat below half—also allows for a meaningful relationship with God right now which is the right kind of forerunner to full belief for some individuals.

¹ Peter van Inwagen, “What Is the Problem of Divine Hiddenness” in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder & Paul Moser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 30.

² *Ibid.*, 31.

³ The period and degree of the doubt can vary among individuals.

We will now summarize Schellenberg's argument and provide the details for the sketch above.

I. The Hiddenness Argument

J.L. Schellenberg has developed a clear, engaging, and significant argument that God does not exist.⁴ His argument is as follows:⁵

- (1) If there is a God, he is perfectly loving.
- (2) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur.
- (3) Reasonable nonbelief does occur.

Thus,

- (4) No perfectly loving God exists.

So,

- (5) There is no God.

Much attention has focused on (2); our contribution will not differ from this growing tradition. We do, however, focus attention on some neglected issues concerning (2). In particular, we find readings of "reasonable nonbelief" on which both (2) and (3) are true

⁴ There are many uses to which the argument could be put, but it seems to us that Schellenberg's own aim is to argue that the agnostic possesses sufficient evidence in virtue of being a rational agnostic to warrant atheism. That is, once the agnostic—who takes the state of the evidence to be roughly a wash—realizes that God would not allow such an evidential state to obtain, she thereby acquires new evidence against God's existence which is sufficient to tip the scales in favor of atheism. We think this is an ingenious strategy even though we think the argument ultimately fails.

⁵ J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993): 83. Schellenberg notes that this is just one formulation of the problem of hiddenness. In a recent article Schellenberg presents the Analogical argument from hiddenness. See "Does Divine Hiddenness Justify Atheism?" in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004): 30-41.

but in a way that poses a dilemma. In order for (2) to be true the reading of “reasonable nonbelief” would have to be so strong that we have no reason to believe the reinterpreted (3). But any kind of reasonable nonbelief we have reason to think is exemplified is not incompatible with the will of a perfectly loving God, thus rendering (2) without warrant. Either way the argument fails.

Premise (2), as we said, is the crucial premise. The support for (2) depends on the idea that a perfectly loving God will provide sufficient evidence for belief that God exists to all willing and able⁶ persons. God will provide this evidence because a personal relationship with God is valuable both in itself and for the benefits it brings to the believer and it is not possible unless a person believe that God exists.

The justification for (2) runs thus:

- (6) If a perfectly loving God exists, he will provide access to the benefits of a relationship with him to all who are willing.
- (7) If God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with him to all who are willing, then reasonable⁷ nonbelief will not occur.
- (8) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur.

⁶ Since the primary issue is *nonculpable* unbelief, we will henceforth drop “and able” but it shall be understood to apply throughout.

⁷ It should be noted that “reasonable” also admits of multiple admissible precisifications. The reasonableness at stake could anywhere on a scale from purely subjective to purely objective. We think the method of the paper works for any sensible account of reasonableness. The two main interpretations which seem to fit Schellenberg’s use are (i) sufficiently probable on correct evidential standards or (ii) non-culpable in a robustly deontological sense. On either reading our argument remains unchanged. Thanks to Mike Thune for discussion on this.

Our target is (7). We will argue that when we take a close look at the nature of belief (7) it is not rationally compelling. In fact, a stronger conclusion follows from our argument; there is good reason to think that (7) is false.

II. What kind of belief?

What kind of belief is required for a personal relationship with God? Reflecting on this question leads us to three considerations that militate against (7). The first consideration arises from distinguishing belief de dicto from belief de re.⁸ Belief de dicto (of the *dictum* or proposition) is the endorsement of some proposition that is preceded by a that-clause. For instance S believes that p indicates that S believes p de dicto. Belief de re (of the *res* or thing) is belief of a thing or individual that *it* has some feature even if the de re believer does not recognize the subject under some specific description. For instance, we believe de dicto that Mark Twain is a great author. But even if we did not realize that Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens, we would also believe *of* Sam Clemens that he is a great author. So we have the de re belief *Sam Clemens is a great author*. One of the questions we address is whether (7) requires belief de dicto.

A second distinction is between categorical belief and degrees of belief. Degrees of belief are common enough.⁹ We believe that $2+2=4$ more firmly than we believe that Juneau is the capital of Alaska. It is safe to say that we'd be more willing to bet the farm on the truth of the former than the truth of the latter.¹⁰ Think of it this way. Consider the

⁸ Belief de se is not relevant to our argument; hence we ignore it.

⁹ If the reader prefers to think of a gradable property of beliefs—confidence—we have no objection. Also, we are not committed to there being precise degrees of belief.

¹⁰ Not that we think betting behavior defines belief: it is, rather, defeasible evidence for it.

property *having mass*. This is sometimes called a determinable property. It can become determinate by having a particular quantity of mass as in the determinate property *having a mass of $9.10938188 \times 10^{-31}$ kilograms* (the mass of an electron at rest relative to the observer). Likewise, *believing that p* is a determinable property which becomes determinate when the degree of belief is specified as in *believing p to degree .95*. Categorical belief is a matter of all-out belief. Sometimes we are interested in what people believe (full-stop) rather than just their degrees of belief. Do you believe the defendant is guilty or not? Other times we are sensitive to degrees of belief. Do you think he is holding a king of hearts? Thus a second question regarding (7) is whether it requires categorical belief or just some level of degree of belief?

A third consideration that arises with respect to belief is the synchronic/diachronic distinction. (7), recall, says *if God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with Him to all who are willing, then reasonable nonbelief will not occur*. Should we understand this as claiming that reasonable nonbelief *never* occurs or merely that at *some specific time* reasonable nonbelief will not to occur? That is, should we read (7) as

(7a) If God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with him to all who are willing, then *at no time* will reasonable nonbelief occur,

or

(7b) If God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with him to all who are willing, then *at/by this time*¹¹ reasonable nonbelief will not occur? [Where “this” ostends some special time the asserter thinks relevant.]

¹¹ This could be reasonably interpreted either as an interval during which reasonable nonbelief is not to occur or as some specific time—a sort of “deadline”—by which reasonable nonbelief must be overcome.

III. The Synchronic/Diachronic Distinction

We begin by considering issues pertaining to the synchronic/diachronic distinction. (7a) is clearly the stronger claim,¹² and we see little by way of recommendation for it. However, Schellenberg explicitly avows the stronger reading. In a recent article he writes, “[W]hat the hiddenness argument actually says is that if God exists, there is *never* a time when someone inculpably fails to believe (belief is made available as soon as there is a capacity for relationship with God).”¹³

In a footnote to his survey on Jonathan Edwards and divine hiddenness William Wainwright offers a counterargument against (7a).¹⁴ First he reconstructs Schellenberg’s reasoning as follows:

1. God wants humans to flourish.
2. If 1, then God would ensure that the necessary criteria for such are fulfilled.
3. For any time and human, a human flourishes at that time only if they have personal communication with God.
4. For any time and human, a human can have personal communication with God at that time only if they have explicit awareness of him at that time.
5. Thus, God would ensure that every human has explicit awareness of him at all times.

¹² Naturally, the corresponding version of (3) will be weaker: (3a) There is some time at which reasonable nonbelief occurs. This is no help, however, since we think (7a) is wholly inadequate. This will reveal a general pattern: on each reading one premise comes out better, but another wholly implausible.

¹³ J.L. Schellenberg, “The hiddenness argument revisited (I),” *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 206.

¹⁴ William J. Wainwright, “Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God,” in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder & Paul Moser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 118.

Then he constructs the following parallel argument.

1. God wants humans to flourish.
2. If 1, then God would ensure that the necessary criteria for such are fulfilled.
3. For any time and human, a human flourishes at that time only if they are as happy as they can be at that time.
4. Thus, God would ensure that every human is as happy as they can be at all times.

Wainwright says that since the latter argument isn't compelling, neither is the former. But it isn't clear that this is a good response to Schellenberg, for if you add "at all times" to premise 1 it still seems plausible and the reasoning is plausibly valid. If Schellenberg already accepts the first argument, he's likely to accept the second one.¹⁵ Why *wouldn't* God want his creatures to flourish at all times? It is not good enough to point out what the argument requires; one must go on to argue that that requirement is too much. In particular we think one does in fact need to advert to some greater good to justify why God would allow times of unhappiness.

A plausible greater good is not far away. The temporary crisis of doubt or the gradual process of coming to realize that there is a personal agent responsible for your

¹⁵ This is an a fortiori argument, for notice that premise 3 in the second version has a maximality property which is lacking in the previous argument. Essentially this point is made by Schellenberg in his response in "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I)," p 208. Furthermore, the first argument just isn't Schellenberg's. Wainwright provides a good summary at the beginning of his article "Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God" (see p. 98) which is equivalent to our own. In light of this it is strange that he would then offer the present pair of arguments.

existence may have great advantages. This has been the testimony of many current theists, including the authors. There is just too much experiential evidence of the long-term value of various kinds of sub-optimal intervals of time to give (7a) much credence.

Schellenberg considers a related point in his recent article.¹⁶ Schellenberg claims that there's another form of hiddenness compatible with his argument. This form is "analogous to what has traditionally been called 'the dark night of the soul' – a state in which there is evidence for God's existence on which the believer may rely, but in which God is not felt as directly present to her experience, and may indeed feel absent."¹⁷ Schellenberg claims that this kind of darkness does not threaten the hiddenness argument.

This response is inadequate. The response requires that (a) non-belief that results from "darkness" is culpable non-belief and that (b) the cases of "darkness" really involve some sustaining belief. But whether non-belief is culpable in some of the cases depends on other relevant facts. For instance, it depends on the psychology of the individual, the period of "darkness", and the quality of positive evidence in the believer's possession. We judge that there are cases in which darkness results in inculpable non-belief and yet that state is overall good for the individual (but remember we allow that belief comes in degrees—more on this later).

About the second claim (b)—that darkness really involves sustaining belief—we think this just false. Let's distinguish between commitment and belief. Suppose Ron is running for governor. A sage tells us that he will win. As we near the election Ron is trailing his opponent by 20% in the polls. Although we were confident that the sage was

¹⁶ "The hiddenness argument revisited (II)," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 299-300.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

right, we now disbelieve the sage's report. Nevertheless we remain committed to Ron's election; for it is not out of the realm of possibility that he wins. A similar point holds in some of the "darkness" cases. The subject remains committed to the Way while nevertheless lacking full-fledged belief that the Way is right. (Again, note the spectral nature of belief).

Moreover, "darkness" may achieve other goods. Swinburne has suggested a greater good defense of hiddenness based on human responsibility for discerning the ultimate truths about reality.¹⁸ It is very important to see the similarity between this kind of greater good approach and the greater good approach in the straight problem of evil. The point of such arguments with respect to hiddenness is that though it might well have been a good thing for God to create creatures who are at all times in loving communion with Him, it is better or even necessary to do it otherwise.¹⁹ In response to Swinburne Schellenberg likens Swinburne's argument to that of Wainwright's. The fact is that the only similarity between the two is that they find it implausible that God would ensure communion *at all times* and we find Schellenberg's response a bit obscure. Schellenberg says that for such arguments to be successful

we must ignore the divine bias toward relationship (i.e. toward making relationship possible). We must suppose that God would have an indifferent, take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward relationship with human beings – that observing certain good things which might flow from remaining withdrawn, God would readily be moved to withdraw.”²⁰

¹⁸ Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 257-258.

¹⁹ Note that the idea that this is even possible seems to assume a kind of behaviorism not consonant with a humanistic understanding of personhood.

²⁰ Schellenberg "Hiddenness (II)," pp. 288ff.

This is clearly a non-sequitur. When we step back and give our kids some distance to let them learn lessons they must learn for themselves, such distance represents the sacrifice of a loving father, nothing like a “take-it-or-leave-it attitude.” Furthermore, this seems to miss the point of greater good arguments. Either it is necessary that a subject should forego some goods at some times so as to enjoy greater goods at some later time or it is not. Schellenberg spends considerable time arguing against the particulars of Swinburne’s argument and against responsibility arguments generally, but he provides little by way of warrant for thinking that the greater good move fails.

Moreover, a crucial difference between our approach and Swinburne’s illustrates that Schellenberg’s response to Swinburne does not extend to our own approach. Schellenberg’s reply that Swinburne ignores “the divine bias toward relationship”²¹ does not apply to our argument. Schellenberg claims that all the kinds of goods to which Swinburne appeals to justify divine hiddenness are tokens of types which would be tokened one way or another even in the absence of divine hiddenness. As a key example,²² cooperative inquiry will surely occur whether or not God grants epistemic distance. Our use of the greater good move, by contrast, adverts to a good which essentially depends upon precisely the presence of epistemic distance.

Schellenberg’s extensive arguments against various “accommodation strategies” are summed up thusly: “Infinite resourcefulness, as even we finite beings can see, would provide many ways for a perfectly loving God to make divine–human relationship a genuine possibility at all times without failing to meet the dominant concern of any of the

²¹ “Hiddenness (II),” 288.

²² Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 210-211.

reasons for God to remain withdrawn that have been advanced, or seem likely to be advanced.”²³ But the sort of reason we’ve suggested is tied to propositions which are typically taken to be outside of God’s control. So even an infinite degree of resourcefulness can’t solve this problem.²⁴

In light of the above discussion (7b) is clearly the more plausible claim. Perhaps at some *specific* kind of time or some *particular* time in each individual’s life, say when one deeply considers the evidence, reasonable nonbelief should not occur. In the end, we don’t find this any more plausible than (7a) and for the same reason. After all, what kind of crisis of faith would it be if it didn’t persist through periods of reflection? We see no reason to think that there is some particular time or some specific type of time during which a loving God would *never* allow disbelief to persist.

The only exception to the above statement would be if there was some deadline after which an individual would be judged. We do not suggest there even is such a “judgement day” but if there were it would be after death and we think it reasonable that a loving God would not allow reasonable nonbelief to persist this far. However, we can only address what evidence people might have in this life and what beliefs they might have in the here and now. Thus hiddenness *cannot* constitute evidence against God’s

²³ “Hiddenness Argument Revisited II,” 298-299.

²⁴ We wish to make it perfectly clear we think that most of Schellenberg’s rebuttals fail in part or in whole. We offer the considerations we do because they differ from anything explicitly considered by Schellenberg (though they are closest to Robert McKim’s *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 34–48) and we think they are some of the best reasons for hiddenness.

existence in the way Schellenberg suggests. We just have no access to the information which would be required to make such a determination.

IV. What kind of relationship?

We have just concluded discussing the results of applying the synchronic/diachronic distinction to the notion of belief. Next, we will consider the results of applying the de dicto/de re distinction and the partial/full distinction. But before we turn to our main argument we need to make some initial comments regarding the concept of a personal relationship. We doubt that an analysis of “personal relationship” is forthcoming. The concept has a wide variety of applications and our argument will rely on some of the less-central instances, instances that lie at the boundaries of the range of admissible cases. Typical instances of personal relationships are husband/wife, brother/sister, friend/friend, teacher/student, lawyer/client, manager/worker, etc. A stronger kind of personal relationship is a “fulfilling personal relationship.” The conditions for this kind of stronger relationship vary with the type of personal relationship, e.g., a fulfilling personal relationship between a husband and wife is different than a fulfilling personal relationship between a lawyer and client. We will return to some issues surrounding our argument relating to the role of belief and personal relationships but for now noting the latitude inherent in the concept of personal relationship should forestall some initial objections. That is, it is no objection to our argument that the kinds of personal relationship afforded by weaker notions of belief are not central cases or cases of robustly fulfilling personal relationships. Our approach could justly be described as eschatological in that we think a robust personally fulfilling

relationship with God is something which—for most people—is a post parousia event. In the meantime we must often be satisfied with less robust but still very meaningful relationships to God. The beauty of it is that the low-level relationships we suggest are available to all persons who are willing and able. Moreover, these relationships are capable of growing and flowering into something completely fulfilling.

V. The nature of belief: degrees of confidence & de re et de dicto

We now turn to our application of two additional distinctions regarding belief to the hiddenness argument: the de dicto/de re distinction and the full/partial distinction. It is clear that the argument requires belief as a condition on the possibility of a personal relationship with God (premise 2). Schellenberg seems to require that the person believes de dicto that God exists, and also that a person has a quite high level of credence that God exists. We will argue that neither de dicto belief nor a very high level of credence is required to have a personal relationship with God.

A. Full or Partial Belief?

First, is complete belief required for a personal relationship with God? We think not. Consider a case in which a person is .9 confident that there is a God. This person performs her religious duties and sacrifices many goods for the sake of a higher calling. We see no reason to suppose that this person's doxastic attitude toward God prevents her from being in a personal relationship with God.

We do not think, however, that very high credence that God exists is required for a personal relationship with God. Consider the following case involving a personal

relationship between two people. Suppose that Jones—an unfortunate fellow—is locked in solitary confinement in a dark prison cell. Jones hears faint taps coming from the other side of his prison wall. The taps resemble the presence of another person willing to communicate, but it is not certain that there is another person in the other cell. Yet, Jones begins to tap back. Suppose this activity continues over a long period, and Jones can—with some effort—make sense of the taps as another person attempting to communicate with him. Suppose Jones’s credence (his degree of belief, rational confidence, or what have you) on the claim “there is another person in the cell beside me” is .5. He seems to be discerning messages, but he realizes that it could just be in his head since the signs are ambiguous. Yet, given that the two persons are tapping back and forth to each other, it seems that they are in a personal relationship, one which in time could take on great significance (again, this latter part is of great importance). The interaction could be so meaningful and hope-inducing that it keeps Jones from going insane or perhaps even keeps him from dying or killing himself. Suppose also that in fact the tapping is coming from Smith who, many years later, meets up with Jones and they discover what was going on. We submit that this part of their relationship will take on newfound significance in their new relationship, something to look back on and cherish, and a surprisingly good foundation for deepening their relationship now that Jones’s credence has been raised to moral certainty by actually meeting Smith.²⁵ We refer to this as the “tapping case.”

²⁵ Note that Schellenberg explicitly affirms that it is acceptable for a relationship with God to vary through time. In another response to Wainwright’s parallel argument Schellenberg writes,

But one only gets an analogue for the mentioned claim and the odd result in my argument if one supposes it to say that God should at all times provide us with a fully salvific life,

We take the tapping case to illustrate that two persons may be in a personal relationship, even a fairly meaningful one, with each other even though the parties lack complete belief that the other exists, and, further, may in fact have a quite low degree of belief.²⁶ If this result holds, we think it makes trouble for Schellenberg's (7). It may be that God is under some obligation to provide evidence sufficient for the kind of belief necessary for a personal relationship with him. But, given the tapping case, this may only be evidence that makes for partial belief.

Non-belief will, of course, be defined in terms of belief. A standard neo-Bayesian account of full belief is credence over some threshold.^{27, 28} The threshold could be fixed

or at all times make the deepest possible human–divine communion available, or something along those lines. And I have said nothing of the sort. All I have said is that we might expect at all times to be in possession of belief, and to have at all times the opportunity to be involved in some level of explicit relationship with God. Indeed, in DH I emphasize that ‘the relationship I am thinking of is to be understood in developmental terms’, that were it to obtain, ‘it would admit of change, growth, progression, regression’, that it might be ‘shallow or deep, depending on the response of the human term of the relation’” (Schellenberg, “Revisited (I)”, p. 208).

²⁶ In fact it may be the case that the parties are both more confident than not that the other does not exist but because of the utility of there being another person they act as if there was another person in the adjacent cell.

²⁷ For a concise treatment of the Lottery Paradox, see Jonathan Kvanvig “The Epistemic Paradoxes,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Craig (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (London: Routledge, 1998).

²⁸ For an alternative view, see for example, as Mark Kaplan explicates it in *Decision Theory as Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 107-110.

or it could vary with context.²⁹ For the sake of simplicity of exposition, we will treat the argument using a fixed threshold of .5.³⁰ This leads to the following interpretation for (7).

(7c) If God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with him to all who are willing then reasonable nonbelief_{Con(T)=n}, where $0 < n < .5$ will not occur.

Our argument in this section indicates that (7c) is false. God can achieve access to the benefits of a relationship with him by partial belief.

Let us engage in a brief aside. Perhaps Schellenberg would wish to suggest that for some n low enough our argument will not work. In that case, we suspect it would be much harder to justify the corresponding (3)—at some specific time reasonable nonbelief_{con(T)=n} will not occur. We would agree that $con(T)=.001$ would have serious trouble supporting our arguments above, but then again we don't think that a reasonable assignment. The debate about that is a separate debate and we won't pursue it further. It is worth noting, however, that Schellenberg often seems willing to grant—if only for the sake of the argument—that $con(T) \approx .5$ is reasonable (before considering the consequences of that very assignment). We think it clear that on this assignment our arguments go through.

Furthermore, even at lower degrees of confidence Pascalian wagering could lead one to adopt a lifestyle which could result in a similar kind of personal relationship as in

²⁹ See Paul Weirich, "Belief and Acceptance," in Niiniluoto and Wolenski, *Handbook of Epistemology*, (Netherlands: Springer, 2004) 499-520.

³⁰ For a defense of this account, see Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.34-38.

the tapping case. There is a vast literature on Pascalian wagering³¹ and we don't intend to add anything new here but only to point out that it is one plausible way to have a relationship with God with quite low credence.

B. De re et De dicto

The second major question is whether de dicto belief is required for a personal relationship? In the final section of William Wainwright's "Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God" he switches gears to consider "a related but very different position, namely, that even where the good of theistic belief doesn't exist, God has provided sufficient light to make salvation a real possibility for everyone."³² This is indeed a very different approach than the Edwardsian response that we sinners are in the hands of an angry God, who fail to believe not because there's not enough evidence but because we culpably ignore it. God makes salvation a real possibility by accepting people who lack de dicto belief.

It would be a mistake to think that to suggest de dicto belief is not necessary for a meaningful relationship with God is to suggest that de re belief is sufficient for all God wants for us. De re belief could be the basis for some further kind of belief still short of de dicto belief. This seems to be what Wainwright has in mind, for he quotes Robert Holyer saying that he "contends that it is reasonable to attribute an unconscious belief

³¹ A good place to start is Jeff Jordan *Gambling on God* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1992). An extensive bibliography follows a critical discussion in Alan Hájek, "Pascal's Wager", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2004 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2004/entries/pascal-wager/>.

³² In Snyder and Moser, eds. *Divine Hiddenness* (2002), 113.

that p to A if A ‘displays some of the dispositions constitutive of a belief p [acting in terms of it, experiencing emotions appropriate to it, drawing inferences from it or holding beliefs from which it can be inferred] without giving assent to it.’”³³ We find the notion of an unconscious belief unhelpful. It’s unhelpful for several reasons. First, those whom Wainwright seems to want to include will not in fact manifest the dispositions mentioned. Also, the concept of de re belief is sufficiently clear and powerful enough to do the work of “unconscious belief” whatever that might turn out to be.

Nevertheless, we do find the suggestion that de dicto belief is not necessary a fruitful one. We firmly agree with Wainwright that “implicit belief may be second best but it can be very good indeed.” In what follows we hope to go some way in backing up that claim.

First, we present a case when you do not have de dicto belief, but you are in a meaningful personal relationship. Suppose in a moment of need some extra money shows up in your bank account. You ask the bank if it is a mistake and they say that an anonymous donor has wired you the money. You think to yourself, “Thank you, whoever you are.” Now in this case you lack de dicto belief, but—especially if the other person can see your reaction (e.g., they are standing nearby)—it is fair to say that the two of you have a meaningful relationship.³⁴

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ A fictional example of this kind of relationship may be found in the TV series *Magnum, P.I.* Thomas Magnum is hired by the rich, mysterious Robin Masters. Magnum lives on Robin’s Hawaiian estate, run by Jonathan Higgins. The TV show suggests that Robin Masters is Jonathan Higgins. Although Magnum does not realize it for some time he is in a meaningful relationship with Robin Masters in virtue of his

Now we tell the story for low degree of belief. Again in a moment of need some extra money shows up in your account. The bank tells the same story as before, but this time you suspect who has done it, though you have around .5 confidence (perhaps less) that you are right. So you have a de dicto belief to the effect of “so-and-so did it” but you have a low degree of confidence in this proposition (e.g., slightly greater than .5). Just in case, you send an anonymous thank you note to the individual. That way, if it is him, he will know who sent it and if it is not, you will not have to explain yourself. Now suppose you are right; it is in fact whom you suspected. It is fair to say you have a meaningful relationship. You have successfully expressed your gratitude to the individual and they have received it.

Now combine the two distinctions and consider a case in which you have neither a high degree of confidence nor de dicto belief. Again in a moment of need some extra money shows up in your account. You do not know if this is a mistake or if someone has given you this money. For whatever reason, it just doesn't occur to you to ask the bank to figure it out. You suspect, though, that someone has in fact transferred this money to you and you think to yourself, “Thank you, whoever you are.” Now in this case you have neither de dicto belief nor a very high degree of belief, but—especially if the other person can read your mind—it is fair to say that the two of you have a meaningful relationship. And as we noted above, this relationship can take on a new level of retrospective significance if in the future you meet the person. We refer to this as the “unknown benefactor case.”

attitudes to Robin (e.g., gratefulness) and his current relationship with Higgins. Thanks to Kevin Meeker for suggesting this example.

We all receive some benefits in this life, and if we are ever grateful for them it seems that we are grateful for their source, so to speak. God is in fact the benefactor of all, so whoever expresses gratitude to the Benefactor in fact expresses gratitude to God and is to that extent in a relationship with Him. This can serve as the basis of a more meaningful relationship later.

As before we distinguish between two renderings of (7):

(7d) If God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with him to all who are willing, then reasonable nonbelief_{de dicto} will not occur.

(7e) If God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with him to all who are willing, then reasonable nonbelief_{de re} will not occur.

The above argument shows that (7d) is false. God can provide access to the benefits of a relationship with him by de re belief. Schellenberg, however, cannot utilize (7e) in his argument. This would require the corresponding claim that reasonable nonbelief_{de re} occurs. Since we have suggested that de re belief in God may occur where one has certain kinds of affective attitudes, the claim that reasonable nonbelief_{de re} occurs requires either that there's no God or that some individuals are reasonable in lacking the right kind of affective attitudes. The first claim cannot be used by Schellenberg and the second claim is not at all plausible.

In short we have shown that once we carefully attend to subtleties apropos belief and different kinds of personal relationships which they make possible Schellenberg's argument fails. Given the preceding discussion it is compatible with the existence of a perfectly loving God that reasonable nonbelief occurs in sense we have specified above. A perfectly loving God can be expected to bring about states of affairs necessary for achieving other good states of affairs. It is good that persons enter into a personal

relationship with God. But we have shown that it is possible to have a personal relationship with God and yet lack a sufficiently high de dicto belief that God exists.

VI. Is it enough?

It is bound to be objected that the hiddenness argument considers a specific kind of personal relationship that's possible only if both parties have strong, de dicto belief that the other exists. So, the objector continues, what we have to say about the nature of belief is interesting but beside the point.³⁵ We think that this objection is misguided. Once the space of possibilities pertaining to belief and relationship is explored we see good reason to suppose that an omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect and perfectly loving being would remain hidden for a time. What's novel about our approach is that we now have the machinery to explain how one can be in a meaningful, even loving, relationship with God whilst lacking strong, de dicto belief that God exists.

It needs to be observed that the hiddenness argument may succeed in deemphasizing certain models of divine-human relationships. This is significant but doesn't threaten theism. We may mistakenly expect certain conditions about divine-human relationships to hold. The discovery that such conditions don't hold can lead us to abandon key assumptions that led us to that expectation. It would be rash to abandon the assumption that there's a God. Sometimes historical inquiry is helpful for philosophical purposes by showing how certain alien assumptions were introduced and then arguments are adduced that ride on those alien assumptions. This is what we find in certain strands of Christian revivalism. A certain strain of Christian revivalism has stressed a model of

³⁵ This was suggested by an anonymous referee.

divine-human relationship that may not hold up to scrutiny if taken as the paradigm of this-worldly faith (which is not to say it cannot occur as a rather exceptional event). We find evidence of this sort of relationship in popular revivalist songs for example. One song that indicates this sense of divine-human relationships is "In the Garden" (Baptist Hymnal song # 428). The chorus is as follows: "And he walks with me, and he talks with me, And he tells me I am his own, And the joy we share as we tarry there, None other has ever known." In our experience this song is taken to indicate a type of relationship one may presently experience with the divine. This kind of relationship is difficult to spell out but it involves two components: (a) a relationship with the divine involves an immediacy that is analogous to the immediacy between two human persons in a close relationship: in some sense God is tangible; (b) the only hindrance to experiencing this immediacy with God is one's own sin. This model of divine-human relationships is theologically suspect as a description of normal divine-human relationships.

Furthermore, it may be that the hiddenness argument succeeds if this is the kind of relationship envisioned. This illustrates an important phenomenon when assessing anti-theistic arguments. Sometimes such arguments lead us to a more accurate understanding of God by focusing on some false—and hitherto unrecognized—assumption. It seems to us that Schellenberg's argument may exhibit this virtue. The situation here is the same as the disconfirmation of auxiliary hypotheses in the philosophy of science.

Moving back to our main goal in this section, we need to indicate what reasons may permit God in remaining hidden for a time. The burden, though, is considerably lightened on our approach. For individuals who are willing to believe may be in a

meaningful, personal relationship with God even though they lack strong, *de dicto* belief. On our account God has brought about the conditions for *access* to an intimate relationship with Him to be realized at a later time. Thus, the present delay of full doxastic disclosure is not an irremediable loss for these individuals. Therefore, if there are some goods of mystery then these goods justify God in remaining hidden, though only for a time.

The first kind of goods of mystery we call *relationship* goods. These are conditions that produce the right kind of affections and dispositions in individuals. God desires that people love him, not merely believe that he is there. Too much evidence too soon could well be to the detriment of finite creatures. Given this, it is plausible that it is best that God grant some epistemic distance. It sounds trite to say that “absence makes the heart grow fonder” but the testimony of many a Christian is that a trial of doubt greatly enhanced their desire to commune with God.

The second kind of goods of mystery we call *personal* goods. These are goods that help shape what kind of person an individual becomes. It may be that there are certain goods of character formation that require some epistemic distance from God. For one thing, there is the issue of authenticity in moral choices. If it were completely evident that the Supreme Moral Judge was watching everything we did, it could damage the authenticity of moral choices and arguably make certain kinds of moral virtue impossible. For another, it might make altruism impossible, since one would always know for sure that he was going to be better off in the end.

It is not implausible that there are goods of clarity, goods that occur only if God’s existence is evident *at every time*. It is difficult, however, to weigh goods. It seems to us

that we can't determine with any reasonable certainty whether the goods of mystery outweigh the goods of clarity or vice-versa. We suspect that the goods of mystery do outweigh the goods of clarity. This implies that it is justifiable for God to remain hidden *for a time*. However, all we need for our argument is that one should suspend judgment about the balance of goods in this case. If one suspends judgment on this point then given our approach one should not expect God to bring about full doxastic disclosure for everyone now.

Conclusion

In the final analysis Schellenberg's argument fails because it envisions God as requiring too much: explicit, highly confident belief at all times. Fortunately, God is more generous. The Christian tradition attests that God will accept far less, he will "meet us where we are". "And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."³⁶ If God exists and is creator of the world, then anyone can have de re belief in him. If one values religious goods, then there is enough evidence to support rational religious faith, which does not entail high degrees of confidence. Neither de dicto belief, nor highly confident belief is necessary for one to be in a meaningful relationship with God, a relationship which grows and develops, and the benefits of which will be all the sweeter for having longed for them. "And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart."³⁷

³⁶ Mark 9:24, AV

³⁷ Jeremiah 29:13, NKJV

We take divine hiddenness seriously and we think that exploring problems associated with hiddenness will yield important truths. One of those important truths is that God is gracious and the benefits he has to offer human beings can be obtained through many routes. Styles of Christianity which fail to acknowledge this will have a much harder time with Schellenberg's argument. Another important truth brought into focus in this discussion is the importance of remembering the dynamic nature of human moral and spiritual development. We are beings which exist in time and go through many stages of development. Things will not always be as they are now. "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."³⁸

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:12, AV